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ABSTRACT

An expatriate second language teacher working in Japan describes and discusses his use of a reflective dialogue journal, written with a colleague using electronic mail (e-mail) and using a collaborative approach to professional development. Four topic areas discussed in the collaborative journal are examined: features of doing cooperative development be e-mail; new teaching ideas and items for future research; clarification of beliefs about teaching and learning; and identification of specific instructional trends and concerns. Each of these areas is explored, using excerpts from journal entries as illustration. It is concluded that the collaborative journal can be a useful tool for teachers' professional development, affording opportunities for reflection and integration not always available in oral interaction, yet facilitating dialogue between colleagues. Contains 28 references. (MSE)

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E-mailを利用したコラボレイティブジャーナル：協同啓発の手法を使って自己を省みる教師を目指す

Collaborative Journalling by Email: using the structure of Cooperative Development to become a more reflective teacher

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別　冊

Neil Cowie

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Collaborative Journalling by Email: using the structure of Cooperative Development to become a more reflective teacher

Neil James Cowie

1. Introduction

In a previous article for the Saitama University Review (Cowie, 1996) I wrote about my experience of Edge's (1992) 'Cooperative Development' model for teacher development with a colleague. In this article I would like to report on a further example of cooperative development, but instead of working with a colleague in a face-to-face interaction the process took place by email. Cheiron McMahill and myself wrote to each other, using the Edgeian framework, twenty three times from July to September, in 1996. I would like to term the resulting text a 'collaborative journal' (after Brock, Yu and Wong, 1992), and use extracts from it show some results that I hope will be of interest to other teachers. In particular I want to show how the discipline of writing within the framework of cooperative development can enable teachers to be more reflective about their work.

2. Background

2.1 A reflective approach to language teaching

In recent years many authors have encouraged a reflective approach to both, initial language teacher education, and subsequent professional development (egs: Bartlett, 1990; Wallace, 1991; Thornbury, 1991; Ellis, 1993; Swan, 1993; Richards and Lockhart, 1994; Kwo, 1996; Davidovich, 1996). Central to a reflective approach is the belief that teachers should gather data about their own teaching, reflect upon it in some way (by talking or writing about it for example), and then act to, possibly, change what they do in the classroom. They would then collect more data and the cycle of reflection could begin again.

Wallace (1991) asserts that 'experiential knowledge' gained from such a cycle of 'action research' is key to a reflective approach to teaching. However, he argues that the articulation of such experiential knowledge has problems and that teachers need a method of 'structured discussion' in order to reflect effectively. I think that Edge's model of Cooperative Development can provide one method for such structured discussion.

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2.2 A brief description of 'cooperative development'

Edge describes a framework of activities and tasks for colleagues to use to help each other to develop professionally. A major aim is for teachers to develop new dialogue skills to use in an, essentially artificial, interaction. Teachers take on the roles of 'speaker' and 'understander' in an imbalanced dialogue, in the sense that it is the speaker alone who is trying to develop, aided by the skills of the understander. The 'easier' role, therefore, is that of speaker as all the new skills, or abilities, have to be acquired by the understander, although, obviously, two colleagues will usually take it in turns to be speaker and understander.

Edge's nine skills are divided into three areas, beginning with 'exploration' (attending, reflecting and focusing); moving into 'discovery' (thematising, challenging and disclosing); and ending with 'action' (goal setting, trialling and planning). Teachers do not have to begin with exploration, move through discovery and end with action, but for new participants this would probably be a logical progression. Once the skills have been learnt participants can use whichever they feel are appropriate for their situation, although their aim should always be action.

2.3 A brief review of diary, or journal, studies

Journal, or diary, studies, are a form of research which have become common in TEFL in recent years. Bailey (1990) differentiates between a 'diary study' and actually keeping a diary. A diary is a first person account of some aspect of teaching or learning, whereas a diary study is the formal analysis of the diary. Bailey identifies three main kinds of diary study that have been done:

1. Language learning accounts of students (eg, Campbell, 1996)
2. Student-teacher journals (eg, Porter et al, 1990; Thornbury, 1991; Jarvis, 1992; Bailey, 1996; Numrich, 1996).
3. Experienced teachers accounts of their professional action (eg, Brock, Yu, and Wong, 1992; McDonough, 1994).

From these different types of diary study it is possible to discern reasons why keeping a diary or journal may be a useful thing for a teacher to do eg, to provide a record of classroom events, or, to give a first hand account of teaching experiences (see Brock, Yu, and Wong, 1993; Bailey, 1990); or, to help teachers to identify recurring issues (McDonough, 1994); or, to make connections that they were previously unaware of

(Porter et al, 1990); or, to clarify their feelings about an issue (Telatnick, 1978, quoted in Bailey, 1990); and, to organise and formulate their thoughts (Johnston, 1991). As these reasons illustrate writing can help teachers to develop by making them think and reflect critically (Bartlett, 1990) on their professional actions. Or, in other words:

"... in reworking, rethinking and interpreting the diary entries, teachers can gain powerful insights into their own classroom behavior and motivation." (Bailey, 1990).

and,

"..in writing ... we take the first step in reflecting on and about our practice" (Bartlett, 1990).

Writing should always be an interactive process, in the sense that the needs of the reader must be taken into account by the writer, however the writer can only try to anticipate the needs of the reader. When writing becomes a truly collaborative process there may be additional gains for each participant by working interactively with one another. For example, through writing, and then responding to another teacher, the writing process can be made to be really interactive for the benefit of all correspondents by decreasing guess work. Each writer will receive feedback on their writing which may lead to improved understanding in the next cycle of correspondence. Brock, Yu, and Wong, (1993) termed this cyclical correspondence "collaborative journalling", and I would like to borrow the term to label the dialogue between CM and myself.

3. An analysis of our collaborative journal

I have synthesised some of the key points from the collaborative journal into four main areas:

3.1 Features of doing cooperative development by email.
3.2 New teaching ideas and potential items for future research.
3.3 A clarification of my beliefs about teaching and learning.
3.4 The identification of specific trends and concerns in my work.

I am aware that this is a very personal list of key points, but I hope that they will be of interest to fellow teachers as an example of one approach to teacher development. I will include extracts from the journals as a kind of snapshot of the development process (labelled CM for Cheiron McMahill and NC for myself).

3.1 Features of doing cooperative development by email

One simple, but very important, feature of email is that it is possible for the writer to 'paste' into a current letter some, or all, of a previous letter, exactly as it was written, rather than paraphrasing or recapitulating in some way, as must be done in conventional letter writing. As a result, ideas or issues which may be forgotten, or dealt with overly quickly, can easily be referred to again. Writing can then become a truly interactive process, in the sense that dialogue is constructed, and then reconstructed, with the most recent writer highlighting sections that they want to come back to, and ignoring ones that they do not. This is different from turn taking in a face-to-face conversation, which may lead to the revisiting of topics, but much depends on the short term memory of individual participants, and offers less opportunity to be reflective.

One result of this 'recycling' of topics is that it is possible to think about them more deeply, or at least more often, than probably would be the case in speaking. By letter 10 the email convention indicating text from a previous message (>>) was beginning to appear three or four times, indicating that a topic had been examined in a cycle of three or four messages. The impact of this is, I think, nicely summed up by CM in Letter 10,

"...in other words the redundancy and repetition of theme seems to deepen my concentration and loosen little bits of repressed memory and awareness." CM.

3.2 New teaching ideas and potential items for future research

Much of the content of the journal was concerned with teaching ideas, or aspects of our teaching that could be researched in a formal way. For example, a major issue in my writing class had been how to give feedback, and what kind of feedback to give, to students that I saw only once a week. CM, either disclosed, or revealed in her role as speaker, a number of very interesting suggestions that I would like to introduce into my teaching. One idea was that, rather than always writing to students, I could try recording my feedback comments on tape giving a 'corrected' version of the student's assignment. Students then have to compare their version with the corrected one, and discover for themselves what, and why, changes have been made. This may have a number of advantages: taping is quicker than writing; the students get extra listening practice; they can discover learning points for themselves; the teacher can combine both 'global' concerns and 'local' ones (Zamel, 1985); and it should be motivating to the students to get some 'live' input from their teacher. I had read about taping procedures but had yet to meet

another teacher who had used them, so 'talking' to CM has given me the confidence to try this technique.

Various items also arose from the journal which could form a future research agenda. Here is one example. Much of the early dialogue in the journal was about my 'problem' students. I wrote, for example, in Letter 9, about a student who had complained to me about my 'style' in the classroom,

"But he has a point - how to deal with students who do not share your style and for whom it is obviously irritating. I've thought about it quite a bit and there is no easy answer I think - but to try to be more aware that my way of things will not please everybody all the time and to be sensitive to those it does not suit." NC.

CM and I discussed this incident of a student complaint in great depth (it featured in the very first message, and reappeared many times right up to the penultimate message). As a consequence of this I am now very keen to observe my own actions in the classroom, and in particular to get information in order to answer the following typical questions: Do I avoid certain people? Do I spend more time with favourites? Do I spend equal time with female, or male, students? In other words, are there any features of the time I spend interacting with students which need to be observed, reflected upon, and possibly changed?

3.3 Clarification of beliefs about teaching and learning

Through the act of writing within the CD framework I was able to clarify a small number of different pedagogical 'beliefs' which I think are important in my teaching life. I do not think any of the beliefs are particularly controversial but are more like 'rules of thumb' to guide my classroom actions. There were a number of minor 'realisations' that surfaced in the journal. For example, one reason students do not often want to rewrite their writing assignments is because they do not have computers, and rewriting in pen is extremely tedious, particularly for a class that only gets two credits.

As I mentioned above, I received some unexpected criticism from two students during a lesson. One 'rule of thumb' to emerge from the journal was to try to handle such criticism outside the classroom, rather than to deal with it during a lesson when other students may be neglected. A rather bigger implication is that I need to adjust my teaching style to be sensitive to all students, and not just those that seem to be trying hard. Just because one student is particularly quiet does not necessarily mean that s/he does

not want attention, in fact very quiet students are probably the ones who need it most.

3.4 Identification of trends and concerns in my work

I would now like to turn to an examination of three major topics that formed much of the content of the journal. These were: the issue of teacher - student relationships in and out of the classroom; the interweaving of private and professional concerns in almost everything we, as teachers, do; and the more specific issue of 'feedback' versus 'support'. Although CM and myself did not consciously set out to discuss these three trends, or concerns, they did seem to emerge frequently and were quite often connected to each other.

a. Teacher - student relationships

One of the stereotyped images of Japanese students is that they are very passive in lessons (cf. Seedhouse, 1992). I am very concerned to 'get to know' my students, not least to lower their 'affective filter' (Krashen, 1981), and possibly decrease this potential for passivity. However, as Letter 13 reveals, in my first two years teaching at university,

"....I have been disappointed with how distant many students are.... I think it's this Japanese teacher - student barrier which seems to mess up, not only socialising, but a lot of other things too." NC.

Through the journal, I gradually confirmed to myself that one of the ways I can have a positive impact on Japanese students is not in the classroom at all, as this extract from Letter 16 shows,

"..it is out of the classroom that you can give more and learn more about them (students)." NC.

And in Letter 22 I confirmed this again,

"In Japan, I feel it's part of my role (and personality) to interact with students outside the classroom." NC.

Allied to this awareness, that it was very important to me to mix socially with students, was the realisation that it would be mainly up to me to initiate any extra-

curricular activity, as illustrated in Letter 20,

"Perhaps power is an interesting word - maybe I have the power to initiate socialising but the students don't." NC.

Since I wrote those words one successful small-scale initiative to encourage better teacher-student relationships has begun: a film and drink evening four times a semester which attracts about fifteen students each time (and, interestingly, several Japanese colleagues). Another potential research area could emerge from this activity, albeit one that will be very hard to check ie, is there any noticeable change in classroom behaviour from students that I see more often outside the classroom?

b. Private and professional concerns

It became clear through the journal that, for CM and myself, our personal and teaching lives overlapped greatly. One way this was revealed was in our dialogue about living and working in another culture, and how isolating this can be, both in the society as a whole, and at work too. I wrote about this in Letter 11,

"... this is the most isolated work environment I have ever been in ..... I think it is positively unhealthy (for me) to be in such an isolated position..... the professional isolation I feel is probably the biggest problem for me at the moment." NC.

This disclosure of isolation also struck a chord with CM, as she wrote back, in Letter 12, the following,

"... I also felt the need to turn to someone for support and understanding to relieve my isolation, but in my case it expressed itself in the desire to be recognized as a human being with feelings and individuality rather than as a foreign entertainer." CM.

A possible reason for our focus on isolation is that, in some senses, we wrote the journal 'in a vacuum' ie, during the summer holiday when neither of us had classes. As a result we tended to examine issues that were wider than 'the classroom', such as what it means to be working in a foreign culture. Perhaps if our journal had been written in term time we would have been much more interested in classroom oriented issues. Edge (personal communication, 1996) questions whether such work, 'in a vacuum', has wider implications, particularly for teachers who are taking time out from the classroom to study for further qualifications. It may be that the lack of an immediate teaching

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context would be a disadvantage for certain teacher development courses, but I found that it was extremely helpful to 'talk' about the wider implications of being a teacher, rather than just focusing on classroom based issues. I think that teachers do need 'space' to reflect on the impact of their professional actions on the society in which they are living, and writing a collaborative journal gave me that space for such reflection.

c. Feedback and support

A third thread running through our dialogue was the way in which teachers can receive feedback about, and support for their teaching. This is connected to the two previous topics in that, in an isolated working environment, one potential source of feedback and support, is from students, as opposed to teacher, or manager, colleagues. One issue that we initially needed to tease out was what we felt feedback and support meant. I gave my definitions in Letter 9,

"Feedback is some indication of how you are doing in the classroom - and I have two sources - myself and the students ... it blends in with support, in that support is needed if you want to carry on with what you are doing ... I want somebody, that I respect, to say that I am doing a good job or if I am not to say why and to help me get better." NC.

I think this shows that I felt feedback can come from students, but support should not. This led to a challenge from CM to encourage me to explain why relying on students for support could be seen as negative. This helped me to clarify my thinking in the following way: seeking support from students is not necessarily 'unhealthy', but it can be if that is a teacher's only source of support (in, for example, the case where there is an absence of colleagues). It is better, I felt, to get feedback from students in order to use that information as one way, amongst several, to assess one's performance as a teacher. In summary, feedback (including that from students) is part of a process of teacher assessment, whereas support goes further in that it should facilitate development.

I would now like to link the issue of support with cooperative development. I found that the journal was a way in which both CM and I could give support to each other, in the sense that the journal provided us with a chance for *"observation at a safe distance"* (Brock, Yu, and Wong, 1992), and a way to provide a supportive environment. I would like to pick out some examples of how this supportive environment led to reflection, and subsequent personal development.

In Letter 4, was an example of how the CD skill of reflecting can sometimes be enough by itself to promote development,

"I appreciate your listening to my complaints ... so "talking" with you has helped me work through this issue for now." CM.

Here is an example, from Letter 12, of how just asking for support can lead to change,

"Actually since writing you about the writing class, I found the energy to go in and make up my class packet of handouts and exercises for the term ... so just breaking my silence about this worry helped me face up to the course. It's amazing how even asking for support sets the wheels in motion." CM.

And one more example, from Letter 15,

"... and I think talking about my public speaking fears helped me too, just to give you credit where credit is due." CM.

I think that collaborative journalling in itself can provide the opportunity for colleagues to be supportive to each other. However, I think the constraints of the CD framework make a supportive environment, or atmosphere, more likely. What I mean by this is that the artificiality of the interaction (eg, the temporary suppression of one's own opinions when in the understanding role), makes it more likely that the understander will be striving to 'support' the speaker drawing on all the CD skills that they can.

4. Conclusion

Can doing cooperative development by email enable teachers to become more reflective, and can it encourage professional self development? In order to become more reflective, teachers need a clear mechanism to help them think about and act upon what they do. CD's role playing and skills, I believe, provide just such a mechanism for teachers to talk/write to each other about their professional actions. As colleagues get used to the artificiality of the CD framework they can help each other become more aware of what is important in their work, and what they can do to change and develop.

Writing too, by its nature as a solitary, inward looking and cyclical activity

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naturally provides more opportunities for reflection than may be the case with speaking. Speakers must respond to the pressure of the moment, and may not always be able to think critically about what they are saying. In addition, email may provide a number of ways to enhance the reflective process; particularly, the feature of incorporating past text into current dialogue allows writers to easily revisit topics and themes; and the speed and convenience of email also facilitates a dialogue which may be too slow to conduct by conventional mail. For teachers who do not have colleagues close at hand, or for whom speaking may be threatening or difficult to arrange, I think collaborative journalling, by email, can provide a viable method of professional self development.

Freeman (1996) has suggested that it is the *'voices'* of teachers which are largely missing from research about teaching and teacher development, and that it is the *'inner, mental life of teachers'* that needs to be articulated in such research. He suggests that one way to hear such voices is through the use of journals kept by teachers about their teaching, which, Freeman claims, can show indirect evidence of these internal mental processes. I hope that I have shown how the collaborative journal I constructed with CM, is an example of the 'voices' of two teachers trying to make sense of what they spend their professional lives doing.

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